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Ciana Cullens '10 follows call to communication activism

Summary: Her documentary, Blacklisted on the Outside: The Importance of Supportive Programming for Ex-Offenders, is airing on Twin Cities Channel 19.

(May 11, 2010)-Many people in their youth dream of growing up and making the world a better place. Some let these dreams fall by the wayside. Others forge a path, bringing that dream into realization. Communication, media, and rhetoric major Ciana Cullens '10, St. Paul, has done the latter with her documentary, *Blacklisted on the Outside: The Importance of Supportive Programming for Ex-Offenders*, produced at SPNN in St. Paul and currently airing on Twin Cities Channel 19.

Curiosity to learn and understand

Communication activism, Cullens's area of academic focus, uses communication devices to support or oppose a controversial issue. "This approach reflects my views on education and everything it means to me," says Cullens, "because it fuses elements of communication theory with other knowledge that's directed at creating change."

Issues affecting the black community sparked Cullens's passion for communication activism. A curiosity to learn and understand these issues took Cullen in many directions. "It made me learn about the history of blacks in this country, and that's where I learned of the rich tradition of activism and how it was used to challenge and change problematic issues for the black community," says Cullens.

Cullens academic project focuses on disparity in prison incarceration rates between black males in contrast to other groups. With help from her adviser, Barbara Burke, associate professor of communication, media, and rhetoric, Cullens crafted a directed study in which she created a documentary on opportunities for felons. *Blacklisted on the Outside* addresses the phenomenon of prison recidivism, its contributing factors, and possible solutions to the problem. The program features a panel of experts in the field as well as compelling testimony from ex-convicts who are members of The NetWork, a north Minneapolis program that addresses the needs of men with criminal backgrounds by creating a sense of family, responsibility, and support.

Blacklisted on the Outside is the latest in a series of events on the activist's journey.

"The first step was finding a place where activism was taking place," says Cullens. "This led me to the St. Paul Neighborhood Network, a community television station that caters to the needs of the community. I built a wonderful relationship with one of the producers, Steve Brunsberg. During my two-year internship, I was given the freedom to dream of ways to address the black community, particularly the black men. One experience that stands out is a series of interviews titled 'Young Successful Black Men' which addressed concepts of success in the black male psyche."

Communication, media, and rhetoric major

Her internship gave Cullens a taste of the profession she was seeking, and her scholarly pursuits at Morris gave her the information and foundation she needed.

“The very reason I chose to major in communication is because I believed that the degree entailed the things necessary for me to be effective in my activist endeavors. My view of education has always been very pragmatic, and I wanted knowledge that was useful and tangible in the world around me. I had a plan to become an activist and some natural skills and gifts, but I didn’t know the theoretical foundations of persuasion, human communication theory, media effects, and production. Every class held a piece of the puzzle to my quest. Each piece of information pertaining to theories about media and stereotypes, persuasion and credibility, editing digital material, and theorists assessing rights and wrongs in moral issues inspired me.”

Cullens was further encouraged to pursue her path when she won a respected scholarship in the major, the Dr. Clara B. Riveland Endowed Scholarship awarded to students demonstrating exemplary practice in the field and strong commitment to theoretical perspectives.

“This major fit me in ways I couldn’t even articulate. I wanted to be a part of creating great visual media and through my efforts I want to help create and facilitate change! There are others like me who seek to disturb injustice through scholarship by way of organizing, discussions, documentary, speech, rally, play, movie, television show, lyric, and poem. It’s not that this is anything new in that people have not done these actions in the past. It’s new in that there is a field growing that will teach students how to think critically about the world around them using communication in theory and in practice to change it.”

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